

Message Text

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TO AMEMBASSY LONDON

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SUBJECT: MORTALITY RATES DURING SURGERY IN THE UNITED STATES

REF: LONDON 03025

1. THE PUBLIC HEALTH SERVICE HAS NOT BEEN ABLE TO IDENTIFY A SOURCE FOR THE DATA ON MORTALITY FROM SURGERY ATTRIBUTED TO THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR HEALTH STATISTICS IN THE NEW YORK TIMES ARTICLE OF JANUARY 27, 1976. THE TIMES ARTICLE STATED THAT "MORE THAN 250,000 OF THE APPROXIMATELY 18 MILLION AMERICANS WHO UNDERWENT SURGERY LAST YEAR DIED DURING OR SHORTLY AFTER THEIR OPERATIONS, ACCORDING TO FIGURES FROM THE NATIONAL CENTER FOR HEALTH STATISTICS." HOWEVER, BOTH OF THESE ESTIMATES ARE HIGHER THAN THOSE OF THE NCHS. WHILE DATA FOR 1975 ARE NOT YET AVAILABLE, NCHS UNPUBLISHED DATA FOR 1974 INDICATE THAT DISCHARGES FROM NONFEDERAL SHORT-STAY HOSPITALS INCLUDED 13.8 MILLION PATIENTS WITH SURGERY AND 19.3 MILLION OPERATIONS. APPROXIMATELY 175,000 OF THESE PATIENTS, OR 1.3 PERCENT, DIED DURING THEIR HOSPITALIZATION. FOR 1973, THE COMPARABLE DATA ARE APPROXIMATELY 13.3 MILLION PATIENTS WITH SURGERY AND 18.4 MILLION OPERATIONS. AN ESTIMATED 176,000, OR 1.3 PERCENT, DIED DURING HOSPITALIZATION.

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THESE DATA ARE BASED ON THE HOSPITAL DISCHARGE SURVEY, IN

WHICH INFORMATION IS ABSTRACTED FROM A SAMPLE OF MEDICAL RECORDS OF A NATIONAL SAMPLE OF NONFEDERAL, SHORT-STAY

HOSPITALS. THE SURVEY DOES NOT OBTAIN INFORMATION THAT WOULD SHOW HOW MANY OF THE DEATHS OCCURRED DURING THE OPERATION.

2. IN SEEKING A SOURCE FOR THE TIMES DATA THE NCHS HAS REVIEWED THE ESTIMATES OF ORGANIZATIONS SUCH AS THE AMERICAN HOSPITAL ASSOCIATION AND THE COMMISSION ON PROFESSIONAL AND HOSPITAL ACTIVITIES. THEIR ESTIMATES OF THE NUMBERS OF SURGICAL PATIENTS AND OF THE PERCENT WHO DIED DURING HOSPITALIZATION ARE OF ROUGHLY THE SAME ORDER AS THOSE OF NCHS, GIVEN THE DIFFERENCES IN SURVEY METHODOLOGY AND HOSPITAL COVERAGE.

3. WITH RESPECT TO THE QUESTION OF UNNECESSARY SURGERY, RAISED IN THE TIMES ARTICLE, THE HOSPITAL DISCHARGE SURVEY DOES NOT PROVIDE INFORMATION WHICH IS CONSIDERED ADEQUATE TO EVALUATE THE NEED FOR OR THE COMPETENCE WITH WHICH SURGERY IS PERFORMED. THE QUESTION HAS BEEN THE SUBJECT OF CONGRESSIONAL HEARINGS (SUBCOMMITTEE ON OVERSIGHT AND INVESTIGATIONS, COMMITTEE ON INTERSTATE AND FOREIGN COMMERCE, U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES). THE COMMITTEE REPORT, "COST AND QUALITY OF HEALTH CARE: UNNECESSARY SURGERY," CONCLUDES THAT UNNECESSARY SURGERY IS PERFORMED. THIS REPORT IS TEMPORARILY OUT OF PRINT, BUT IS EXPECTED TO BE REPRINTED. A SECOND STUDY THAT MAY RELATE TO THE QUESTION HAS BEEN CONDUCTED BY THE AMERICAN COLLEGE OF SURGEONS AND IS SCHEDULED FOR PUBLICATION LATER THIS YEAR. ROBINSON

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